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# *New Paths to Enlighten Passion for Education in Challenging Times: DigiSEL and Creative Education*

# *Nowe ścieżki nakreślające znaczenie pasji dla edukacji w czasach niosących wyzwania. DigiSEL i kreatywna edukacja*

## ABSTRACT

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** This article examines teachers' attitudes towards socio-emotional learning (SEL) and digital technology in the post-pandemic era, focusing on the DigiSEL project. This project aimed to integrate digital tools and SEL to support students' well-being and academic success, enhancing primary school teachers' skills in these areas.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The study involved partner countries conducting qualitative and quantitative analyses to determine the needs of in-service and pre-service teachers. The Italian team's needs analysis, conducted through a Focus Group and a creativity survey, revealed insights into teachers' attitudes and experiences with digital teaching and creativity skills development.

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The authors introduce the DigiSEL project, detailing how it aligned with their research for the online course modules.

**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The Italian team's focus group outcomes highlighted innovative solutions for educational challenges. Initial frustration with technology evolved into a rewarding transformation as educators mastered its use. Online courses were identified as motivating and providing novel approaches to address students' diverse issues, such as concentration and emotional expression difficulties.

**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** Despite challenges, the project effectively supported educators in their roles and maintained their enthusiasm for teaching. Drawing inspiration from earlier European research on creativity and ICT in teaching, this study aligned

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with teachers' perceptions of creativity as vital for students' development and demonstrated how technology could enhance teaching methods. In conclusion, the DigiSEL project showcased the potential of merging SEL and digital tools to empower educators and foster student growth amidst evolving educational landscapes. More research should take in consideration the importance of SEL and creativity to enlighten passion in teaching with new and inspiring methods.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **CREATIVITY, EDUCATION, SEL (SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING), DIGITAL, TECHNOLOGY**

## STRESZCZENIE

**CEL NAUKOWY:** Artykuł analizuje postawy nauczycieli wobec uczenia się społeczno-emocjonalnego (SEL) i technologii cyfrowej w erze postpandemicznej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem projektu DigiSEL. Projekt ten miał na celu integrację narzędzi cyfrowych i SEL w celu wspierania dobrego samopoczucia uczniów i sukcesów w nauce, podnosząc umiejętności nauczycieli szkół podstawowych w tych obszarach.

**PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE:** W badaniu uczestniczyły kraje partnerskie prowadzące analizy jakościowe i ilościowe w celu określenia potrzeb nauczycieli czynnych i przygotowujących się do pracy. Analiza potrzeb włoskiego zespołu, przeprowadzona za pośrednictwem grupy fokusowej i sondażu dotyczącego kreatywności, ujawniła wgląd w postawy i doświadczenia nauczycieli w zakresie cyfrowego nauczania i rozwoju umiejętności kreatywnych.

**PROCES WYWODU:** Autorzy przedstawiają projekt DigiSEL, szczegółowo opisując, w jaki sposób jest on zgodny z ich badaniami dotyczącymi modułów kursów online.

**WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ:** Wyniki grupy fokusowej włoskiego zespołu zwróciły uwagę na innowacyjne rozwiązania wyzwań edukacyjnych. Początkowa frustracja związana z technologią przekształciła się w satysfakcjonującą transformację, gdy nauczyciele opanowali jej wykorzystanie. Kursy online zostały uznane za motywujące i zapewniające nowatorskie podejście do rozwiązywania różnorodnych problemów uczniów, takich jak trudności z koncentracją i wyrażaniem emocji.

**WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE:** Mimo wyzwań projekt skutecznie wspierał edukatorów w ich rolach i podtrzymywał ich entuzjazm do nauczania. Czerpiąc inspirację z wcześniejszych europejskich badań nad kreatywnością i technologiami informacyjno-komunikacyjnymi w nauczaniu, badanie to było zgodne z postrzeganiem przez nauczycieli kreatywności jako kluczowej dla rozwoju uczniów i wykazało, w jaki sposób technologia może udoskonalić metody nauczania. Podsumowując, projekt DigiSEL pokazał potencjał połączenia SEL i narzędzi cyfrowych w celu wzmocnienia pozycji nauczycieli i wspierania rozwoju uczniów w zmieniających się środowiskach edukacyjnych. Więcej badań powinno uwzględniać znaczenie SEL i kreatywności w rozbudzaniu pasji w nauczaniu za pomocą nowych i inspirujących metod.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **KREATYWNOŚĆ, EDUKACJA, SEL (UCZENIE SIĘ SPOŁECZNO-EMOCJONALNE), CYFROWE, TECHNOLOGICZNE**

## Introduction

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic remains profound. Over 1.5 billion people were confined globally to curb SARS-CoV-2 spread (Almuzara et al., 2021; Huh, 2020). Alarmingly, lockdowns led to societal, economic, psychological, and educational disruptions (Almuzara et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021). The pandemic notably disrupted regular education since December 2019, prompting countries like Turkey, Poland, Italy, and Spain to seek solutions through training and innovative teaching techniques. UNESCO's April 2020 announcement of educational closures in 186 countries impacted about 74% of enrolled learners worldwide (UNESCO, n.d.).

Lockdowns shifted education to virtual platforms, accelerating necessary 21st-century digital transformation, revealing teachers' unpreparedness for digital teaching. A survey involving 4859 respondents from 40+ countries, including 66.9% teachers, indicated their initial online teaching experiences due to COVID-19 (School Education Gateway, 2022).

Maintaining positive student relationships posed a challenge in distance learning. As soft and digital skills intertwine with social-emotional learning (SEL), fostering cognitive, affective, behavioral, and digital proficiencies becomes imperative for 21st-century adaptability. The significance of early childhood SEL skills, swiftly developing and linked to later outcomes, remains a focus for educators and researchers (Zins et al., 2007). Investigations into skills-based interventions targeting children's SEL are prevalent (McClelland et al., 2017).

D. Goleman's book (1995) *Emotional Intelligence* highlighted the importance of social and emotional learning, sparking increased interest in the field. Studies demonstrated enhanced social and emotional competencies post-publication (Bierman et al., 2008; Caldarella et al., 2009; Castillo et al., 2013; Pendry et al., 2014). Social and emotional learning (SEL), comprising self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision-making, underpins positive behaviors and academic growth (Greenberg et al., 2003). SEL shifts youths from external emotional control to internal mastery (Bear & Minke, 2006). SEL programs effectively address mental health issues, reducing depression, anxiety, social anxiety, and emotional problems (Lewis et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Bavarian et al., 2013; Coelho et al., 2015; Humphrey et al., 2010; Muratori et al., 2015). SEL initiatives also elevate academic performance (Bradley et al., 2012; Bavarian et al., 2013).

Facing unprecedented challenges, such as those posed by COVID-19, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) emerges as a tool to foster creativity. "Creativity defies precise definition," noted psychologist Paul Torrance (1988, p. 43). The multifaceted nature of creativity, encompassing fantasy, imagination, and innovation, is evident in research and theories, highlighting its various dimensions and perspectives.

Comparing definitions across time reveals the evolution of creativity studies. Originating in the late 19th century, these studies surged in momentum from the 1950s onwards, notably in the United States and Europe. This transformation, stemming from extensive interdisciplinary discussions involving neuroscience, psychology, philosophy,

pedagogy, sociology, economics, and communication, reshaped our global understanding of the creative mind.

Today, creativity is recognized as a pivotal adaptive factor for individuals, businesses, organizations, and societies, with profound implications for education systems. Just a few decades ago, completing formal education and entering a lifelong career sufficed. Knowledge evolved slowly, measured in decades. Yet, these foundations have shifted dramatically. Knowledge now grows exponentially, with fields seeing information life spans measured in months. In response to this rapid knowledge obsolescence, nurturing creative thinking becomes paramount.

J. Delors, in his 1997 report *Education a Treasure*, underscored education's fundamental role in fostering freedom of thought, judgment, feeling, and imagination. This imperative extends beyond individualism, as recent experiences demonstrate that cultivating such qualities not only empowers individuals against alienation but also propels societal progress. The diversity of personalities, autonomy, initiative, and the joy of provocation act as guarantors of creativity and innovation (Delors, 1997, p. 88).

In this article we present a study implemented within the Erasmus+ DigiSEL Project, carried out between June 2021 and May 2023. The overall aim of the project was to support primary school teachers, who are the main target group, both digitally, socially, and emotionally.

Given these foundations, the Italian team tried to better understand how teachers perceive and understand creativity, foster creativity through their teaching and what they think about the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) to promote creativity. Moreover, the preliminary analysis made in the partner countries of the DigiSEL Project showed the need of getting advanced training on the technical, social, and emotional development of skills along with digital teaching techniques. Indeed, teachers with high literacy of social and emotional skills and equipped with digital components are more likely to be able to raise the students both socially, emotionally, and digitally. Those findings require a transformation in learning & teaching processes in online classes. As the development of soft and digital skills interrelate with social and emotional learning, it's pretty crucial to upskill sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies as well as digital ones so that they can adapt to the rapid transformations which are essential in the 21st century.

## Project description

The DigiSEL project aimed to enhance primary school teachers' social and emotional development skills in the digital realm through course development focused on:

- Improving student learning skills.
- Effective classroom management and interpersonal communication.
- Developing empathy and behavioral skills among students.
- Cultivating creative thinking and problem-solving abilities.
- Utilizing online methods, techniques, and tools.

Coordinated by Kuthaya Dumlupinar University, the project included partners like University of Salerno, WSB University, University of Lumsa, M&M Profuture S.L., Kütahya Provincial Directorate of Ministry of Education, and University of Zagreb. It aimed to equip teachers with soft skills and teaching materials through face-to-face and distance training. Each partner was responsible for specific outputs.

Modules included:

1. Improving student learning capabilities (University of Salerno).
2. Effective classroom management and communication (Kuthaya Dumlupinar University).
3. Developing empathy and behavior (M&M Profuture S.L.).
4. Creative thinking and problem-solving skills (LUMSA, Rome).
5. Using online methods in primary education (WSB University).

The courses were digitized by UNISA and shared for open access, extending their impact. Initial qualitative and quantitative analyses of teachers' needs were conducted across partner countries to inform course development. The Italian team's research methodology and results are detailed in the following paragraphs.

## Methods, participants, and procedures

*Qualitative analysis (Focus group)*. This study was conducted during pandemic period. The focus group discussion lasted 90 minutes. Participants were 13 teachers, 12 women and one male. Besides the 13 primary school teachers, two more people participated in the Focus group: one secondary school teacher (age 55; 6 years of experience) and one member of INDIRE – the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research, that is the Italian Ministry of Education's oldest research organization. The age of the teachers was between 20 and 59 with at least 3 years of teaching experience.

*Quantitative analysis (Survey)*. A sample of 104 Italian preservice teachers were involved in the study. Most of them were women (98%) in the age between 25 and 60 years old. The age clusters were the following: 25–35 (24%); 35–45 (33,7%); 45–55 (29,8%) and only 10,6% of the participants were more than 55 years old. Regarding the length of teaching experience, 38,8% had job experience from 1 to 5 years and 27,2% an experience between 10 to 20 years, most of which were located in central Italy.

The teachers who agreed to participate in the research were invited to a preliminary online meeting in which the principal investigator explained the main objectives of the study, the procedure, and the participants' rights. All participants that were agreeing to be added at the research. Those who accepted to take part to the survey received the link for the anonymous online questionnaire via mail. The study followed the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki of 1964 and its latest version, as well as the APA ethical guidelines. One of the researchers of the study has previously completed the National Institute for Health training course 'Protecting Human Research Participants' (Certification Number: masked for review).

## Measures

### *Focus group questions*

Participants discussed their approach to digital teaching and learning as both participants and instructors, addressing three topics with three questions each:

1. Approach to digital teaching & learning as a learner/participant: Effectiveness, obstacles, opportunities.
2. Approach to digital teaching & learning as a teacher: Effectiveness, obstacles, opportunities. Taken courses?
3. Social Emotional Learning (SEL): Familiarity, effectiveness, previous use.

The last set of questions focused on online teaching experiences, techniques, tools, managing communication, and approaching emotional and social dimensions in classes.

### *Creativity survey*

We used a European research questionnaire (Cachia & Ferrari, 2010) covering 4 areas: teachers' perception of creativity in education:

1. primary school teachers' creativity approaches;
2. ICT tools;
3. Fostering creativity: necessary context and support.

## Results

*Focus group*. In the focus group, participants shared their experiences of transitioning from traditional to remote teaching and learning during the pandemic. Most found this shift challenging and adopted various learning methods, including webinars and assistance from technologically savvy friends. Many found existing courses inadequate for their needs. Despite the difficulties, participants recognized that practical learning on the job was often more effective than formal courses. While participants did not strongly favor face-to-face training over remote methods, some expressed challenges in staying engaged with theoretical online courses. Opportunities in online learning were acknowledged, with participants noting the autonomy of self-guided learning and the innovation offered by online courses.

Participants confirmed the effectiveness of their digital teaching and learning approach, engaging students and fostering positive classroom environments. Challenges included the need for preparation and use of different tools for online lessons. The shift to online teaching was novel for many teachers, and they sometimes felt like supervisors rather than active educators. Online teaching allowed for greater student autonomy but presented challenges for students with disabilities and younger students, as well as socio-economic disparities in access to technology.

Amid these difficulties, teachers identified opportunities for growth in their digital competencies. They observed students with a natural aptitude for digital tools and noted

improvements in students' presentation and research skills. Online learning motivated students, even those with learning disorders, and provided opportunities for deeper engagement. Some teachers observed positive changes in selective mutism and emotional expression among students.

In relation to Social Emotional Learning (SEL), participants understood its significance, describing it as an approach that acknowledges emotions and interpersonal interactions in learning. The challenges of teaching SEL online were noted, with the absence of certain sensory cues making interaction less intuitive. Nevertheless, many believed that SEL could effectively be integrated into online education, fostering emotional growth, and building a sense of community among students.

The focus group revealed that teachers provided spaces for dialogue and emotional expression in both online and face-to-face settings. Circle time and group discussions helped students address tensions and navigate their emotions, fostering a supportive classroom environment. Some teachers integrated creative methods, such as theatrical adaptations of emotion-themed books, to engage students in expressing complex emotions related to the pandemic. These approaches helped students feel connected and less isolated.

Overall, teachers demonstrated adaptability and resilience in embracing online teaching methods, while also cultivating emotional intelligence and problem-solving skills among their students. The focus group outcomes highlighted the importance of student engagement, emotional well-being, and creative teaching strategies in navigating the challenges of remote learning during the pandemic.

*Survey*. The results of the survey showed that 100% of the respondents believe that creativity can be applied to every domain of knowledge and every school subject. This confirms that teachers tend to have a positive, wide view of the topic and consider creativity as being applicable to several fields and domains. Creativity doesn't concern only arts: only 9% of the respondents think that creativity is only relevant to visual arts, music, drama, and artistic performance. Teachers refuse an elitist view of creativity since they do not perceive it as a characteristic of eminent people only (80% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement). Nine out of ten teachers sustain the statement that everyone can be creative, nevertheless 28% of the teachers think that creativity is an inborn talent. Considering these two last results together implies that most respondents view creativity as a skill that can be developed and fostered in each person.

Almost 50% of teachers surveyed think that creativity is the ability to produce something original; half of them agree that creativity is about finding connections between things that have not been connected before. Less than a half of the respondents (41%) think that creativity is the ability to produce something of value. But what teachers stated concerning creativity for education was very interesting: almost all teachers (90%) believe that creativity is a fundamental skill to be developed in school; respondents have a more nuanced opinion on the feasibility of teaching creativity (61% agree or strongly agree and 28% nor agree or disagree). Probably teachers find difficulties in valuing creativity: only 54% of respondents think that creativity can be assessed. There is an

impressive high agreement amongst teachers (88%) that ICT can be used to enhance creativity. This shows that a high proportion of teachers surveyed understand the potential of technology for teaching. When asked which skills and abilities they foster in their students, a high proportion of teachers responded positively to the activities which are understood to foster creativity: ability to think (51%); curiosity (48%) critical thinking (43%). Again, when asked which behaviors they reward, they seem to prefer behaviors that are related to creativity, such as curiosity (63%) or relating different subject (55%).

In previous European research conducted by Cachia and Ferrari in 2010, that inspired us for our module, the results showed that teachers think that creativity is a fundamental skill to be developed in schools. Moreover, ICT can be used to foster creativity and improve teaching. This research and also our results provide some understanding of how creativity is interpreted and practiced by teachers.

Indeed, our results from the survey highlighted that nine out of ten teachers in this survey endorse a democratic view of creativity sustaining that everyone can be creative and believe that creativity can be developed at school. These results are aligned with the previous research (Cachia & Ferrari, 2010). Nevertheless, traditional teaching and assessment methods and resources are still predominant. There is clear evidence that a vast majority of teachers agree that ICT can be used to enhance creativity and to improve teaching. The findings described provide some understanding of how creativity is interpreted and practiced by teachers. This analysis demonstrates that there is a gap in teacher initial frame that will be fill with a program like DigiSEL project.

## Conclusions

The aim of the DigiSEL project is to support primary school teachers both digitally, socially, and emotionally, in response to the Pandemic outbreak developing an innovative digital course, structured in 5 modules, on social and emotional learning.

This is also a new way to lighten passion in education. The results of the focus group conducted by the Italian team showed us different ways to find new solutions at the challenging request of the period. Specifically, the participants reported emotions as frustration at the beginning but very challenging and good transition as soon as they were able to manage the technology. Furthermore, they highlighted a significant opportunity presented by some online courses, which not only allowed them as teachers to explore and inspire themselves but also created innovative scenarios to assist their students in expressing themselves. Some students encountered challenges such as lack of concentration, immobility, and difficulty in expressing emotions. However, this report has demonstrated that despite these new challenges, this project proves highly beneficial in helping them perform their jobs more effectively and maintain their unwavering passion for education.

Another way to pass through these hard times and not lose the passion for education is the creativity. Creativity is the new thing that produces something good for the community. Recovering the ethical and relational sense of creative action and considering

creativity as a fundamental option for the education and training of contemporary man are two sides of the same coin. Erich Fromm pointed out that "creativity means having completed one's birth before dying" (Fromm in Anderson, 1972, p. 77). The task of being architects of one's own existence – and of one's own creativity – is realized thanks to a consolidated capacity for deliberation and design, for ideal self-construction and creative behaviors: that is, it is accomplished through operations of decision and choice that concern not so much and not only individual life, but also the collective consciousness as realized in the civil world and in the cultural universe (Bertin, 1998, p. 79).

In conclusion, we hope that in future research more studies will focus on the importance of SEL and creativity to enlighten passion in teaching with new and inspiring methods.

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